



Jacquelyn Fogel

spayed and placed in a pet home after the first litter, and no bitches from her litter were used for breeding. The brood bitches I kept were not always the most beautiful, but they were always sound, and always good mothers. I knew I would have to work at getting “the look” back, but first I was determined to use only good mothers. I’d work on “the look”

these disorders, so I was not particularly concerned—until a potential puppy buyer asked me which of the BHCA recommended tests I did on my dogs before I bred them. Then she refused to buy a puppy from me when I told her I didn’t do any of them. She did not care that I had spent 15 years building a healthy, sound line of dogs that came from bloodlines

## THE PITFALLS OF HEALTH SCREENING

Six months ago I had a basset litter that I love more than I have loved a litter in a long time. It was the result of a planned strategy to rebuild my line of dogs and recapture the look I had without the poor mothering (unwillingness to nurse the puppies, mastitis and high incidence of puppy smothering). I had finally decided, after five generations of similar problems, that the lack of mothering skills was being passed down genetically and I was tired of hand-raising puppies. I loved the look of my dogs, and if they got to adulthood they were healthy. But keeping the babies alive had become a stressful, often disappointing, always exhausting ordeal. I decided to cut off that entire branch of my family tree, and start over using only healthy, free-whelping bitches that demonstrated a willingness and ability to mother puppies successfully. If a bitch I bred turned out to be a less than stellar mother, she was

after I got health and soundness down. This litter was the first I had done to try to recapture “the look.”

During this 15 year rebuilding process I lost track of what was happening in the basset hound parent club. The BHCA has always been a well-functioning club, and I didn’t think it needed my input to remain that way. Our Nationals often conflicted with the Montgomery County shows, and I was more than a little distracted by my terriers. I have not been to a BHCA annual meeting in years. So it came as a surprise to me to learn about all of the health screening the club was now recommending that breeders do on all of their breeding stock. I knew there were some glaucoma and bleeding disorder issues in some lines, but the breeders I knew had all worked hard to reduce the incidence of these diseases in their dogs. I know. We talked about it. I had not ever bred a dog with either of

that were not known to carry the diseases for which we were supposed to test, or that I used familial longevity and health as one of my criteria when I chose a dog to breed. My 45 years of knowledge and skill in breeding these dogs was secondary to the science of the tests I was expected to run. I was shocked.

I know it is currently the expected thing to do—run every imaginable genetic test, and every test for hips, elbows, eyes, heart, or bleeding disorders. There seem to be tests for hundreds of potential maladies, and more are being discovered every day. The health care industry is alive and well! But I am not convinced that all this testing is leading us towards healthier dogs. All the science in the world cannot replace the wisdom and experience of carefully breeding dogs for multiple generations. It is certainly making the breeding of quality purebred dogs enormously expensive, and those expenses are rarely recaptured



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by breeders. It also focuses breeding too narrowly—on one or two predominant disorders at the expense of the whole dog. I don't just breed livers, or hearts or eyes—I breed dogs. Whole dogs.

Meanwhile, the general public is getting used to buying their pets from shelters and rescues. Those dogs are usually mixed-breeds with no health guarantees. Some people even like the idea of rescuing dogs that have obvious health problems in hopes they will be the ones to provide just the right care to get the unhealthy, unsound dogs through their troubles. Purebred dog breeders are helping to make this the easier decision. We are training the public to look for and expect disorder in our purebred dogs (why else would we insist on doing so much testing if we did not know there were lots of problems in our dogs). The pet-buying population is more than happy to settle for "as is" in the rescue or mixed breed market, but never in a purebred dog, even though the initial cost of the dog is not substantially different. This public does not trust us as breeders, they only trust the science. There seems to be no shortage of magical thinking in the pet-buying world.

So what do breeders get in return for all of the testing they do? Hopefully we avoid the devastating, life-threatening illnesses that kill dogs early. That is the hope, but it is not always the reality. I have bred dogs for more than 40 years. I used to take a long view of my breeding program. Did dogs in the bloodlines I used to create my own line live long, pretty healthy lives? Are they good whelpers and mothers? Are their temperaments sound? If I accidentally produced an unhealthy dog, this lead to a re-examination of the pedigree, and a search for clues as to what happened. I did not automatically assume everything was caused by genetics, and assumed some problems could be environmental or even bad luck. The science was used as a tool to augment, but never replace breeders' acquired wisdom.

Recently I sold two show-quality dogs to a young woman who wanted to start her own breeding program. She took one of my wonderful puppies from the last litter, and we

spent hours talking about pedigrees, dogs, training and health issues. She was happy as a clam to have two really nice dogs to start breeding, and I loved the idea of finally finding someone to take over a breeding program. She took my first pick male from the younger litter, and my second pick female from the older litter. She went home, and about a month later she sent me an email asking what I thought about all of the health testing being recommended on the BHCA web site. I responded as follows:

"I am not opposed to doing the testing, but I think breeders focus way too much on the "science" and forget about common sense. I like to breed to healthy dogs that live long lives without a lot of problems. I know in bedlington terriers we have gotten ourselves into some real nasty corners by focusing on Copper Toxicosis at the expense of whole-dog-health, and narrowing the gene pool so much that we now have other, nastier health issues we have to worry about. I believe health-testing has become a real boon for veterinarians, but has done little to actually improve the health of our dogs. Life is not risk-free, and no amount of testing is going to take the risk out of it.

That's my health-testing soap-box for the day. Do it if it makes you feel better. I think it mostly just makes you financially poorer. I have to do it in bedlingtons, or I could not sell puppies. I really hope bassets don't become the same. Health-testing is misnamed—it should be called illness identification. And if your dogs are not sick, then don't worry—save your adrenaline fatigue for issues that really matter."

The puppy buyer who would not take a puppy from parents that had not had any of the recommended health tests lost out on a great puppy. I am keeping three for myself, and have placed two others in show homes. And I have the privilege of starting a young person on the road to becoming a good, thoughtful breeder. If we make it too complicated, and too expensive no one will follow us. That's what the Animal Rights people want, but it's not what's best for breeders. ■

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ASSISTED BY:  
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